DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 946 CS 208 207

AUTHOR Alexander, James D.
TITLE Creative Writing across the Curriculum.
PUB DATE Feb 84
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two Year College (19th, Milwaukee, WI, February 16-18, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Writing; *Creative Writing; Creativity; Curriculum Development; *English Instruction; Expository Writing; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; Student Research; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

English courses should help students recognize the interrelationships among creative and expository writing, literature, and language. By helping students understand literary elements such as point of view, for example, creative writing courses can produce better student narratives. Required composition courses should replace sterile exercises in explaining and arguing with some creative requirements. Examples of exercises that integrate creative writing elements into expository assignments include having students paraphrase currently popular works and create courtroom scenarios demonstrating powerless-powerful personal interactions. An exercise incorporating creativity into the research assignment involves (1) having students write a definition of language that includes all human speech but excludes animal communication, (2) then having peers critique the definition using scientific source materials, and (3)--following a revision by the original writers--having peers try to prove an animal is human based on the definition. To increase student sensitivity to writers' craftsmanship, literature courses can ask students to write something similar--to create heroic couplets, for example while studying Alexander Pope. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED241946

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Creative Writing Across the Curriculum

James D. Alexander

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James D. Alexander

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 208 207

Creative Writing Across the Curriculum

I became interested in the applications of creative writing to other courses last spring when I realized how little our courses are discreet entities, like tidy academic packages separate from one another. This was when I was teaching a course in creative writing. For our class, creative writing seemed to involve the theory of literature. Concepts like round and flat characters, realism of dialogue, initial and rising actions, authorial witholding of information, the clichéd plot--all come into play. You can't teach a course in writing narrative unless you cover point of view, and when I did so, I noticed that my creative writing students grasped the concept of point of view more quickly than if they were Introduction to Literature students.

They surprised me in another way. They gave reports on books that treated writing like it was exposition. Writing novels to be published requires a meticulous outlining for plot and close notes for characterization. One book, titled Overcoming Writing Blocks by Karin Mack and Eric Skjei, presented a sample outline, of the branching type, for a subject that would be developed in a persuasive paper. The paper's thesis was that in regard to capital punishment, swift and sure justice is the real issue. My students saw no discrepancy between this technique and the procedures for creative writing--they considered the outline quite applicable to the kind of writing they were doing.

Our class was publication oriented, and the whole issue of writing to sell made it seem to me very calculated, even more so than the standard five-paragraph composition, as to audience. My students got a clear conception of their readership in this course, the segment of the public they were writing to and who would purchase their product, in a lucid way that composition students do not.

It began to occur to me that a composition student could benefit from a course in creative writing of this type. (I do not mean a course in expressive writing.) So could a literature student, of modern literature, particularly. We may have lost something when we decided that creative writing was not practical enough for people who would be writing articles, brochures, ads, and memos, in short doing the daily work of the world, and thus we rigorously excised this kind of writing from our composition classes.

As a case in point, I remember 20 years ago when I came as a teaching assistant to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the syllabus I was given was a case study in how to reduce freshman writing to a depersonalized common denominator of the type that would come off the line at the River Rouge auto plant. I am ready to retrench, and to make an argument for creative writing as useful in other courses, some even beyond composition. Apparently the idea has taken hold. One section of the CCCC meeting next month in New York is titled "Creative Writing Across the Curriculum," and I am eager to hear what it holds in store.

In my creative writing course, I gave after five stories and scenarios, a final assignment which was to write a freelance article, of the type the students would submit to a magazine. The assignment was intended to be one that integrated the techniques of research--or at least factual writing--with those of creative personal writing. It was my point to bring about a coalescence at the end of the course between expository and creative writing.

At this time I brought in a local writer, a person who is supporting himself with his freelancing. He told my students about the technical writing and house publications he was doing. He explained to them--they half knew it already--that all good writing in the marketplace demands a creative element.

Thus the element of creativity--probably mearing originality--is not the thing that separates fact from fiction. It is the thing that separates the successful from unsuccessful writing.

My point is that we can reverse the trend in required composition courses toward sterile exercises in explaining and arguing if we reinvest them with some creative requirements. This does not mean requiring one short story out of 10 writing assignments in an expository writing course. Whatever merit this may have, it is not the point I am making today. I am talking about integrating creative writing elements into some of our expository assignments.

I want to make the point that what I am saying is not new. It is a kind of recognition we must undergo every few decades in our profession. Some 20 years ago, Denys Thompson described an investigation taken in West Yorkshire in which a superintendent of schools called for writing samples from the students in his area. He found, in Thompson's words, "that good creative writing on topics that really engaged a child led to good 'recording' or 'reporting' writing of a more impersonal kind. By 'recording' writing, I mean, for example, the kind that they need for writing up science experiments and geography notes" ("Aims and Purposes of Teaching English in Britain," A Common Purpose, NCTE 1966, p. 10). The kind of writing demanded in technical and report writing courses may be improved by a student's having a foundation in creative writing.

Let me illustrate. If we do not make the mistake of merely obligating a student to go out and write a short story, we will forestall the kind of objection he might make that he will never be required to write a short story in his later profession.

But do this instead. Take a passage from Jim Klobuchar's Kind Hearts and Purple Heads, which is a biography of the Minnesota Vikings. Tell your students that the Copyright Law allows them to write about the same material as long as they do not adopt the wording of Klobuchar. Then have them restate the passage in their own words, as if they were writing a feature article of their own. Tell them they must do three things. First, they must make it readable enough so that a publisher will take it. Second, they must avoid reproduction of Klobuchar's style or else they will be sued for infringement. Third, they must keep to the facts or risk being sued for libel. Whether they must document or not is up to you, since the 1976 law does not require credit for factual material in narrative. Obviously this is a scheme to give the students exercise in paraphrasing, but it is a very practical writing exercise because in fact writers do just this.

Writers do paraphrase themselves. You can bring in the parallel passage from Klobuchar's later book Tarkenton, which he published personally, and show it to the students. If the students object that the passage is too close in its wording to the original, tell them that this is what Ross Haines thought. Ross Haines is the publisher of Klobuchar's first book and brought Klobuchar to court for infringement of its copyright. Tell your students you'll do something equally dire to them if they try to pawn off their high school essays on you in a college course.

But this illustration may take too much of your creativity and not enough of the students', so let me give you another one. William O'Barr in his book Linguistic Evidence: Language, Power and Strategy in the Courtroom (Academic Press, 1982, pp. 120-1) gives directions for witnesses who want to sound influential when they are being cross-examined. He says things like vary the form of your answers, interrupt the opposition to volunteer answers, ask the examiner (if she gets too aggressive) why she is repeating a question you have already answered, try to give long answers that will trigger an interruption from the opposition because it gives the impression that she does not want your full story told, and more. Then assign your students to write a scenario in which they create a powerful-powerless courtroom interaction. Show the witness, by his lines in the dialogue, exerting power over the cross-examiner (or being overpowered by her). This allows the students to create their own court case and history. American literature and media are replete with courtroom scenes, so the setting will be familiar to the students. But they must both follow a certain chronological line and follow directions in order to get the right result. If you feel that writing scenarios is respectable (I have assigned them in other instances with success, particularly with students not normally high achievers), it is worth a try because it gives scope to your students' imagination.

However, you may prefer to stimulate interest by bringing creativity to that most formidible of writing efforts, the research assignent. Let me give an example for those who teach one or more short research exercises, as I do. Do not announce what you are going to do ahead of time. On a day when you are to be covering definition, have your students write a one-paragraph definition of language. Have them use a whole paragraph and tell them the definition must be inclusive of all humans and exclusive of animals. Then have them put their names on the back of the sheets and have them randomly distributed in the class. Then have each student take her new sheet and go and look up a source like a biology textbook, and test the definition against, say, bees and dolphins. Have her first evaluate the definition, show whether it is clear. Then have her, if she finds a counterexample, write a refutation to the definition showing it to be too inclusive. Then return the original and the comment to the first student and require him to refine his definition to anticipate the objection. You can do this secure in the knowledge that you have given your students exercise in the competences of definition, research, refutation, and revision.

But this is where the fun begins. Give the revised versions to the second students again. Have each go out and explore one or more of the articles on talking apes, chimps, and gorillas. There is a rapidly growing body of literature on the subject. The student could check the publications of the Premacks, or more pointedly read Penny Patterson's 1978 National Geographic article "Conversations with a Gorilla." Require the student to summarize (and document) the pertinent parts of the source and then with the informa-

tion, create in written form a hypothetical illustration of a primate and prove that it is human. You can probably see the implications this has for compositional techniques, and perhaps for the views of those who like Pope hold that there is a "nice barrier" between us and the beasties.

You have doubtless observed that all my illustrations have involved language in some way. You see, when we teach English we don't have to stray from our subject. I am of the persuasion that English consists of composition, literature, and language, though the language leg of the tripod is a little short. My premise is that these are the core elements of an English curriculum in a small or two-year college and that we should take pains to integrate these elements in any of our courses. This does not mean factoring out one assignment in language or creative writing, but integrating these elements in with other assignments in the course.

Just to make you aware of what may be the beginning of the trend, I instance the most recent edition of Frank O'Hare's The Writer's Work (2nd Ed., Prentice-Hall, 1983) which he wrote with Dean Memering. The text is a fairly well-known rhetoric for composition courses now. O'Hare has made his reputation working with generalized transformations, but if you look in his section on informative writing to the sample student essays on process, you'll be surprised. That driest of expository types is exemplified by three of the most imaginative pieces you'll ever find of their type. The three, on how-to-do-it processes, really tell how to change a flat, how to use a power saw, and how to make commercial french fries, but with a high quality of panache and personal voice. The third, especially, is impressive for its imaginative appeal because it embeds the process in a first person narrative with conflict arising from the fact that the character is telling another how to get the potatoes fried.

This is exactly what turns an otherwise dead-end assignment into something practical. And I do mean practical, in the real life sense. Dean Marquardt, a recent prize-winner for Wisconsin public radio drama, says that when he has to report on a conference to his colleagues, he does not give them the straight facts. He creates a character and puts the facts in a dialogue, to greater effect.

I'm going to say only a few things on infusing creative writing into literature courses, because I think you can supply the rest. And while I'm doing so, you might take those cards I gave out and note down at least one thing you have done, or want to do, to bring some element of creative writing into some other courses you teach. I'll collect the cards when I finish, which will be soon. Then I'll read them to you. If you would like me to identify you and your school, just jot down that information on the back of your card.

On literature, I am reminded of what Louise M. Rosenblatt said over four decades ago. You remember, she authored that influential book on teaching literature in a way that invites identification on the part of the student, Literature as Exploration, originally published in 1938 (3rd Ed., Noble and Noble, 1976). She realized that we can make our students sensitive to the craftsmanship of writers if we have our students attempt to do something similar first. It doesn't matter how badly the exercises come off, since we won't grade them on that but only on how well they can respond to the authors' success.

Rosenblatt writes, "One of the best ways of helping students to gain this appreciation of literary form and artistry is to encourage them to engage in such imaginative writing. In this way they will themselves be involved in wrestling with the materials offered them by life or by their reaction to it; they will discover that problems of form and artistry are not separable from the problems of clarifying the particular sense of life or the particular human mood that the work of art is destined to embody" (pp. 48-9).

Let me give you one example that is not the standard one, not the worn-outone about giving the students a formula and having them expand it into a story, then showing how Hemingway did the same. Rather, I made the attempt with poetry, or perhaps just verse. My literature course covers British works to the end of the 18th century. I wanted to give my students a feel for the consummate skill of Alexander Pope's heroic couplets, so I gave them a take-hcme quiz which was mandatory but would be ungraded. They were to complete some couplets, five, with closure, by supplying the second line. I supplied all the first lines. A final question had them create an entire closed couplet on a subject of their own choosing. What I got had only a few gleams. In these, the first line is mine.

a) A bore will keep his listeners at bay
b) As if some dreaded pox he did convey.

a)We hoard our guns and bombs to guard our peace
b) While odds of Armageddon e'er increase.

One entire couplet is worth quoting:

To our new press, my brother, evil blessed
Took some friends. Needless t'say they were impressed.

But this was it. For the remainder, I recognized that most of my students could not get the right meter, the right number of syllables, or the right rhyming sound, when all of these were easily within reach. So my students, who groused about the exercise the whole time and wouldn't be giving me any awards for innovative teaching, did demonstrate that they must have seen virtuosity in Pope's metrics. By the way, capping lines was an old 18th century pastime. Moreover, teachers assign their students even now to write haiku and other short fixed forms of poetry when they cover them in class, but usually in introduction to literature courses (I have, myself). I am not aware of the practice in literature survey courses.

By now you have probably thought of grander ideas of your own and are noting them on your cards. I want to end by saying that I am not recommending that we introduce required creative writing courses into our curricula, as salutary as that would be. As someone said, changing a curriculum is like moving a cemetery. What I am proposing is that we relax the boundaries of our courses, or build more bridges between one course and another--whichever metaphor you like--to let our students unders tand that English is all one subject.

James D. Alexander
University of Wisconsin Center-
Marshfield/Wood County
Marshfield, Wisconsin 54449